

# A Survey of English Only Policies in the Workplace

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## I. Introduction

On June 18th, 2012, TV Asahi gave viewers an inside look at the effects of the introduction of an English Only policy at the headquarters of the online retail company, Rakuten, with its broadcast of 完全英語化いよいよ [“Kanzen” eigoka iyooyo “Complete” Englishnization at Last]. Sato (2013) transcribes a conversation between an office worker Tetsuya Iida and his supervisor James Chen.

Iida: I, I discuss a method o of organization management – with a,  
Kawa-san and Ono-san

Chen: Okay. Any conclusion?

Iida: <looking at James>

Chen: Any information?

Iida: Hmm. <puts his fist to his chin> No—ah that that meeting is --  
na nandaro ko ... brainstorming?

Chen: Ah okay. Nice ideas.

Iida: Ono-san is ah group manager ... and one more is ...

Although in many respects Iida is considered a successful English language learner—he improved his TOEIC score over two years with regular study; he is a highly motivated learner and user of English; and he was successful in communicating his basic point to James—it appears that Iida’s English lacks the necessary detail and accuracy to

facilitate trouble-free communication in the workplace. As pointed out by Sato (2013), Iida relies upon James' familiarity with the communication lapses of Japanese English speakers to bridge the gap between Iida's imprecise vocabulary and usage, and the actual message Iida wishes to convey.

The scene from Sato (2013) graphically illustrates the challenges of the sudden use of English as a lingua franca in a workplace that employs people who have routinely used another language for their professional and personal lives. In essence, a sort of an inverse diglossia emerges. A diglossic relationship involves a social situation in which a community of speakers alternate between language varieties in complementary social domains (Ferguson 1959). So for instance, a Portuguese immigrant to Japan might use Portuguese in private spaces such as the home, but in a professional space such as work, use Japanese. However, in Japan, restricting the socially dominant language to the home while privileging the internationally prestigious, yet ancillary language English, at the workplace in effect flips the norms of the association between linguistic private and public space demands. As such, it is easy to imagine that a person using an unfamiliar language at work, a place that demands efficiency and smooth communication, may feel intimidated when losing the ability to apply the language that best facilitates their work.

Understandably, as companies grow more global, they must find ways to facilitate communication between subsidiaries and international clients. Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) identify a number of motivations for the adaption of English Only language policies such as: pressure from global partners; the need to coordinate tasks across multinational corporations; and the improvement of communication streams across merged and newly acquired companies. English Only workplace policies exist on an international scale across companies such as Daimler AG, Kone Elevators, SAP, Siemens, Philips, Nokia, Alcatel-Lucent, Nissan, Technicolor, Rakuten and Microsoft (Neely, Hinds and Cramton 2012). Unfortunately, most companies use top-down language policies that inadvertently assume what authors such

as Barner-Rasmussen and Aarnio (2010) refer to as a mechanistic view of language learning. Essentially, the management sees communication as an endemic problem in the workplace and then decides that selecting a lingua-franca, typically English, can resolve the communication problem. Such companies then proceed to establish policies with little input from all of the relevant stakeholders. As a result, employees must work to deal with the challenges of a large corporate policy shift that requires working diligently towards language targets while maintaining normal work responsibilities. Changing a language culture places unique demands on a workplace in a way that differs significantly than, say, adapting a new computer system. Language makes up a part of one's identity and serves as the fundamental basis by which we communicate our ideas and feelings as well as signal our relationships to one another. Lingua franca adaptation is bound to radically reshape any work culture.

This article will provide a preliminary survey of number of case studies that reveal the challenges and limits of English Only policies. Such studies beg the question of what degree of trade-off exists between workplace performance and communication facility. Essentially while top-down lingual franca policies can establish criteria for language use and documentation for a company, oftentimes work inefficiencies are introduced due to several factors: new language barriers emerge due to inconsistent levels of communicative competency in the official language; previously existing hierarchies become upended by shadow power structures that privilege language proficiency over job rank or competency; and emotional anxiety emerges from the pressure to master and use an unfamiliar language in the workplace. The research suggests the need to recognize multinational corporate environments as essentially multilingual environments and to adapt language policy accordingly.

## **2. The case studies**

Five case studies will be used to illustrate the challenges of estab-

lishing English Only policies in the workplace. This section briefly describes these case studies.

## **2.1 Neely (2013) Rakuten**

Neely (2013) uses a survey to do a case study of Rakuten in response to the new Englishnization policy. She describes the three phases of the policy: English proficiency assessment, which required all employees to score at least above 650 on the TOEIC test; the invitation of lecturers to discuss English learning and study; and the evaluation and monitoring of employees' use of English in the workplace.

## **2.2 Sato (2013) Rakuten**

Sato (2013) assesses the English use of a Rakuten office worker in 2012. Sato's makes observations about a TV Asahi documentary after the two year build up to the start of Rakuten CEO Mikitani's Englishnization initiative. Sato focuses on to what extent the employee Iida can be considered a successful language learner and the perceptions about Iida's language performance from the perspective of company managers and a corporate trainer.

## **2.3 Saulière (2013) A French multinational**

Saulière (2013) does an ethnography of a French multinational company, he labels with the pseudonym Globum, that decides to use English as its lingua-franca for work related to its alliance with a Korean manufacturer. Globum is a company with a reputation for extensive English use due to its English language policy that requires executives to pass a standardized English test. However, the majority working language of the company is French. Saulière observes the work of a project team of about 30 French employees and one non-French speaking Korean employee from an allied Korean manufacturing company. Saulière gathers his findings through observations and interviews.

#### **2.4 Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) A Finnish multinational, Kone Elevators**

Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) look at the case of a Finnish multinational company, Kone Elevators and its subsidiaries. They demonstrate how the company's English only policy imposed new, informal structures on the organization. Language becomes a source of new-found power for those people who are proficient in English, eventually allowing them to act as mediators and power brokers.

#### **2.5 Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) Overview of several multinational companies**

Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) investigate the challenges that accompany the introduction of English Only workplace policies across different multinational companies. They note that the anxieties and disruption caused by English only policies tend to create more work, a loss of information in meetings and the upsetting of collaborative practice. Some employees avoid meetings and conversations, switch to their native language or condense complex information into short summaries. They recommend empathy, and encouragement to help deal with the shift to a *lingua franca*.

### **3. Challenges of English Only Policies**

Each case study above introduces key challenges that emerge from the adaption of companywide *lingua franca* policy. This section discusses each of the problems with illustrations from the case studies.

#### **3.1 Language barriers from inconsistent levels of communication competency**

Ironically, companywide *lingua franca* policies can create language barriers or communicative inefficiencies. Such problems can arise from the fact that the chosen language, typically English, serves as no one's native language, and leads to misunderstandings or unclear language

use. Additionally, employees who typically would not be expected to undertake their work in a second language suddenly find themselves tasked with not only their normal work duties, but time consuming language study and/or translation.

The office worker Iida from Sato (2013) still had to deal with communicative difficulties in the workplace despite his sincere efforts at adhering to Rakuten's language policy. The business people in Sato's study who commented on Iida's performance considered Iida a good language learner based on his TOEIC score improvement from 420 to 785 and positive attitude towards English use. However, in terms of language performance, most did not judge Iida's language competence, while those who did noted that his language proficiency was insufficient for working effectively in an English business environment. The corporate trainer interviewed by Sato noted that Iida's supervisor had to bootstrap Iida's conversation in order for their communicative interaction to be successful.

Neely (2013) underscores the Sato (2013) concerns about barriers that emerged from uneven English language competence among employees at Rakuten. The employees found that there could exist a gap between TOEIC test score performance and actual communicative ability. Despite improvement in the general English competence of employees, their growth in English ability did not sufficiently mitigate miscommunication due to the lack of English communicative competence necessary for a business environment. Rakuten as employees complained about productivity loss due to the English requirement for all company communications. Project delays emerged due the need to develop materials in Japanese and then translate them to English. Email correspondence in English delayed communications in Rakuten as well.

Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) found that the Finnish multinational, Kone Elevators had constant communication barriers between subsidiaries because of the use of documentation exclusively in English from headquarters. Some subsidiaries adapted by translating documents to local languages, but a new problem emerged. Sometimes

employees with high English proficiency who lacked technical expertise would translate technical documents inaccurately.

Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) also discuss a number of results of the communication barrier. Kone Elevators found it difficult to develop relationships across companies through English only trainings at regional headquarters, which employees not proficient in English tended to avoid. Language policy ultimately did not resolve the language barriers in the company.

While improved communication serves as the predominant image used to promote and justify companywide lingua franca policies, oftentimes in practice such policies have unanticipated effects. They link multilingual groups by forcing proficient multilingual employees to serve as pipelines or channels that compensate for the uneven communicative ability among the staff in the companywide language.

### **3.2 Upending of previously existing power relationships**

One of the most disrupting results of company lingua franca policies is the shifting of power hierarchies within the company. As mentioned in the previous section, varying levels of language competency force language proficient employees to bear the weight of mitigating communication difficulties. This creation of unofficial language channels affects power relationships in radical ways.

Central to the Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) examination of the Finnish multinational Kone Elevators is the dramatic shift in the corporate power hierarchy. They found that language proficiency in two or more of the company languages gave such personnel more power than their formal positions would typically provide. Piekkari, Welch, and Welch (1999) identified a type of shadow structure (p 13) that worked alongside the formal hierarchical structure of the company. They note that subsidiary staff largely communicated through intermediaries to deal with language barriers, and oftentimes expatriates served this role. This led to Finnish employees gaining more important roles, which sometimes left non-Finnish employees isolated from the decision making process.

Saulière (2013), in his examination of a French multinational, notes that proficient users of the corporate language gained significant informal power. The result of the shift in power dynamic was to interfere with collaboration. Largely the communicative problem emerges since adapting a corporate language does not eliminate communicative barriers, rather it hands the corporate problem of intercompany communication down to the individual company or subsidiary level and creates new interpersonal problems centered around language brokering in the workplace. For instance, the workgroup of 30 French speakers in Saulière's study found it strange to speak English in order to accommodate the one non-French speaking member from Korea. The English policy prevented members from questioning the legitimacy of a set-up many did not support and lead to tensions among the members. Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) in their overview of several multinational companies similarly revealed that a number of employees at the French, Japanese and Chinese companies reviewed expressed frustration at not being able to effectively communicate their expertise in English so felt inferior and a loss of agency.

### 3.3 Language anxiety

All of the studies discussed to some extent the anxieties of employees who suddenly were tasked with doing their jobs in a second language.

The Saulière (2013) French multinational study emphasized how the shift to English as the working language to accommodate one non-French speaking employee had a massive impact on teamwork in the group. It took the work group members much longer to prepare presentations in English and negatively impacted the range of communication that the group members could use, as they lost communicative fluency and precision. A number of group members also had anxiety stemming from insecurity about their English proficiency. In discussions, members were reluctant to speak outside their area of expertise, which limited the extent of their interactions.

The Neely, Hinds and Cramton (2012) overview of multinational



companywide language policy found significant losses of productivity and increases in anxiety about communication across companies.

In the case of Rakuten, simply the requirement to learn English created significant stress for employees. Iida in the Sato (2013) Rakuten study had significant barriers to overcome in order achieve his new level of English proficiency. Iida noted that he needed to study around five to six hours a day after work and also suggested that it caused some stress in his family life. Neely (2013) notes that one of the big challenges for the Rakuten employees was finding the time to learn English despite their busy work schedules. Additionally employees had to bear the costs of any English lessons. Months before the TOEIC score achievement deadline, many employees had yet to meet the target and risked demotion.

#### **4. Worker Adaptation**

Companywide lingua franca policies typically lead to adaptations by workers to deal with their lack of proficiency in the company language. Saulière (2013) discusses a number of coping strategies used by employees who lacked confidence in their English ability. Some gave up expressing their viewpoints, some tried to delay decisions so they occur later outside of the meeting, use a subordinate as a representative, or simply make some arguments in French. The project leader tried to facilitate meetings in ways that would give key stakeholders more opportunities to speak and participate, or even discuss meeting items with such members after the meeting. Ultimately, the team manager saw a loss of efficiency. Similarly Neely (2013) found a number of avoidance strategies used by employees not proficient in English. Managers skirted the use of English, or executives would read scripts prepared by subordinates at meetings.

## 5. The need to recognize of multinationals as linguistically diverse

Ultimately the five studies show a discrepancy between company expectations and actual practice in response to companywide lingua franca policies. Oftentimes companies expect employees to learn the corporate language on their own time and to then to immediately apply their new language skills. In practice, employees frequently lack the time and resources to learn the new language quickly and oftentimes have a number of difficult to overcome affective filters that prevent successful language use at the outset. However, employs adapt and do find ways to work within the bounds of the new language policy – and oftentimes they rely on finding proficient polyglots to act as channels of communication. The result of a reliance on informal translators translates to shifts in the power hierarchy by creating informal channels of power and influence, which potentially disrupt company norms.

One way to help mitigate the problems that arise from the incorporation of a companywide lingua franca is to recognize and acknowledge that the workplace still will perform as a multilingual environment. Such an acknowledgement carries a number of advantages. Performance anxiety in relation to the corporate language can be reduced when employees know that it is fine to code switch as necessary to meet the demands of a given task. For instance, very complex discussions can be done with professional interpreters or subcommittees based on language groupings could be formed. Language proficient members of subgroups can then lead the discussion when the larger group convenes. Formally choosing members who will serve as language conduits or ambassadors can relieve the strain of conflicts caused by informal language facilitation arrangements. Rather than have a subordinate suddenly represent an executive at a meeting, a person at the executive rank who is language proficient could be tasked to help facilitate communication for other executives. In some cases, such an arrangement would require promoting or hiring executives with the

necessary language proficiency. The use of such employees then shows the company's commitment to adhering to a language policy in a way that does not put the task of resolving language tasks by default on subordinates. Formal establishment of communication channels and clear corporate support would form the bases of stronger communication conduits and greatly improve cross-company communication.

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